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NEWS & ANALYSIS (/EN/TAXONOMY/TERM/9979)

#StandWithFatima: Campaign Defends CUNY Graduate Who Spoke For Palestine

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Yemeni American CUNY law student Fatima Mohammed went viral for delivering an honest and striking commencement speech on May 12, criticizing the Israeli regime, white supremacy, and the NYPD. She spoke of the new graduates' role in “working to lift the facade of legal neutrality and

confront the systems of oppression that wreak violence on them. Systems of oppression created to feed an empire with a ravenous appetite for destruction and violence. Institutions created to intimidate, bully, and censor and stifle the voices of those who resist."

Her words struck a nerve uniting politicians from both sides of the U.S. political establishment as well as the university administration, Zionist organizations, and mainstream media against her in what became an Islamophobic smear campaign. Mohammed was harassed, slandered, and bullied for speaking truth to power.

New York City Mayor Eric Adams slammed the CUNY graduate on Twitter by calling her speech "divisive" and carrying "words of negativity." Adams also spoke during commencement about his time in the NYPD. His appearance came as a shock to the graduating class, who did not know he was going to speak. His speech was met with boos from the graduating class, and their backs turned to him in protest of his increased funding for the NYPD and sustained partnership with the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF). Mohammed was also attacked by Democratic representative Ritchie Torres who called her 'crazed,' and Republican senator Ted Cruz who called her speech 'antisemitic.'

In her speech, cheered on and applauded by peers, Mohammed said: "This is the law school that passed and endorsed BDS on a student and faculty level. Recognizing that absent a critical-imperialism-settler-colonialism lens, our work, and the school's mission statement is void of value. That as Israel continues to indiscriminately rain bullets and bombs on worshippers, murdering the old, the young, attacking even funerals and graveyards, as it encourages lynch mobs to target Palestinian homes and businesses, as it imprisons its children, as it continues its project of settler colonialism, expelling Palestinians from their homes, carrying the ongoing Nakba that our silent — that our silence is no longer acceptable." Mohammed also drew parallels between U.S. state violence and Israeli settler-colonialism by pointing out the cooperation of the "fascist NYPD, the military, [how the NYPD] continues to train [Israeli] soldiers."

The CUNY Board of Trustees caved to right-wing and Zionist pressure and released a statement claiming Mohammed spewed "hate speech" and condemned her for speaking out against Israeli settler-colonialism.

CAIR-NY stated that they "stand in solidarity with the student commencement speaker who bravely sought to elevate the plight of Palestinians and the human rights abuses they face." CUNY School of Law Jewish Law Students shared words of solidarity as members of a "public-interest-focused law school, we have a duty to stand with Palestinians against Zionist oppression, as Fatima has done." Other organizational statements in defense of Fatima came from CUNY Law Faculty, Collectif Palestine Vaincra, Palestine Legal, National Lawyers Guild International Committee, Jewish Voice for Peace NYC, Center for Constitutional Rights, Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, and the Arab American Association of New York.

The CUNY Law administration attempted to censor the 2023 commencement livestream by removing it alongside the 2022 commencement recording from the university's YouTube page. This move was widely protested by students and alumni, forcing the administration to re-upload both videos. Last year, the university administration also attempted to censor its CUNY Law commencement speaker, Nerdeen Kiswani, a Palestinian organizer and founder of the grassroots group Within Our Lifetime (WOL), who was also subjected to a harassment campaign. Both Mohammed and Kiswani were elected by their graduating class as valedictorians for their respective years.

Although, the Board of Trustees has not been able to escape students' discontent with the Trustee's increasing ties to Israel and escalating repression of student organizing for Palestine. On June 5, CUNY students and workers took direct action (https://docs.google.com/document/d/1uZuZ32wSSgXF8Nysza6QnInuZkyhrSTtxjhDi9TbdNI/edit) at a Board of Trustee Committee meeting on Student Life to expose their complicity in the right-wing and Zionist smear campaign against a CUNY student.

“You do not represent CUNY, you are not welcome here,” chanted protesters outside of the Board of Trustees meeting room, “We all stand with Fatima, she represents all of our values, not yours we don't stand with fascists or racists.”

The Board of Trustees continues to stand by their statement that normalizes the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and the dangerous target they have placed on a CUNY student.

WOL and CUNY for Palestine have joined forces to defend Mohammed for bravely using her platform to raise awareness of the Palestinian struggle and to defend the right of students to organize against systems of oppression. Both organizations have called for signatories to a statement (https://wolpalestine.com/defendfatima/) to “demand that the attacks against Fatima immediately cease” and are asking supporters to email the CUNY administration to “recant their accusation of ‘hate speech' and protect Fatima and all their students from right-wing, Zionist harassment.”

A similar statement of support was released on May 21 by the CUNY Jewish Law Students Association. However, on June 6, the statement, housed in a Google document, was removed by Google for ‘violat[ing] Google Drive's Spam policy.' WOL republished the statement on their website (https://wolpalestine.com/jlsastatement/), accusing Google of censorship.

On June 21, Mohammed gave an interview to Jewish Currents (https://jewishcurrents.org/fatima-mohammed-has-no-regrets) stating that she “would not change a single word” of her speech and that she “would say it louder.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Henna Farrah* is a college student attending Portland State University in Oregon. She is a student organizer with her campus' Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) chapter and a BDS organizer in her city.

* *pseudonym* used to protect the writer's identity.

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